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EAST TIMOR

DE-BUNKING THE MYTHS AROUND A PROCESS OF DECOLONIZATION

Remarks

By

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Since so much time has elapsed, the history of the decolonization of East Timor 17 years ago has for many become a blurred recollection and for some a convenient opportunity to try to re-write that history according to their own ideological inclinations or preconceptions or to serve their particular political ends. However, basically and in a nutshell, the East Timor issue is, irrefutably, a case of decolonization utterly mishandled by the erstwhile colonial power, Portugal, in complete contravention to the fundamental human rights of a people, oppressed and neglected for over four centuries.

When in April 1974 the dictatorial Caetano regime was overthrown and the new Portuguese government proclaimed its intention to decolonize all its "overseas provinces", the Indonesian Government wholeheartedly welcomed that decision. Having over the years consistently supported the people of East Timor to exercise their right to self-determination, Indonesia reiterated its oft-stated position that it had no territorial claim to East Timor and that it would abide by any decision taken by the East Timorese as regards their political future through a proper and fair process of decolonization. As the facts show, since before and after the proclamation of its own independence, Indonesia had scrupulously maintained its stand that its national territory only comprised the former Netherlands East Indies, no more and no less. This, in spite of the fact that Portuguese East Timor was half an island right in the middle of our archipelago. If we ever had expansionist designs or ever coveted that territory, as Portugal now alleges, then would it not have been easier to realize such an ambition at a time when Portugal under the Salazar/Caetano regime was so universally unpopular as to foreclose any international censure, as in the case of Goa in 1964 ?

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As originally planned, the people of East Timor were to decide on their political future through a form of a referendum, appropriately adapted to and in

conformity with their traditional democratic practices. The proposed referendum would, in line with UNGA Resolution 1541, present the people of East Timor with three options :

* to become an autonomous territory in federation or association with Portugal;

* to become a separate, independent state;

* to integrate with the Republic of Indonesia.

Towards this end, the colonial authorities allowed the setting up of political parties in East Timor and five parties were formed in 1974.

The U.D.T (Uniao Democratica Timorese) was, by Portugal's own admission and as widely acknowledged by unbiased observers, the largest party among the five as it enjoyed the support of 230 out of the 472 existing sukus or clans in the territory, comprising approximately 50% of the total population. It also drew large support from the East Timorese civil servants. The U.D.T. initially opted for association with Portugal, but later supported integration with Indonesia.

The FRETILIN (Frente Revolucionaria de Timor Leste Independente) opted for the independence of East Timor although it had never opposed, let alone participated in the struggle against Portuguese colonialism. In fact the Fretilin has always played exactly the opposite role, that of a favorite collaborator of the colonial administration. As a curiously concocted melange of, on the one hand, a small group of young radicals and, on the other, the worst elements of the Portuguese colonial army (the TROPAZ) it never had any roots in East Timorese society. Instead, as described by the Far Eastern Economic Review (October 17, 1975), it desperately tried to "acquire a Frelimo-type image through a vague, collectivist ideology, a flag and an anthem" and sought for years, but failed, to get recognition by the Non-Aligned Movement as a "liberation movement." And until this very day, their remnants and their long-discredited cause are being sustained under the protective custody of Portugal.

The APODETI (Associacao Popular Democratica de Timor) originally called itself AITI (Associacao Integraciao de Timor Indonesia), which reflected the long-standing desire of the people of East Timor for integration with Indonesia. As a political grouping which has waged a persistent struggle against Portuguese colonialism for which many of their leaders were jailed, tortured, exiled or executed, this party indeed deserved to be identified as a true liberation movement. From the outset, APODETI opted for integration with Indonesia, based on the conviction that the people of East Timor, inhabiting the same island as the people of West Timor and sharing with them the same ethnic ancestry, culture and language, should rightfully be re-united, thus ending their separation by an artificially drawn colonial boundary line.

The two other parties the KOTA (Klibur Oan Timor Aswain), deriving its strength mainly from the traditional leaders or chieftains and the TRABALHISTA (Labour Party) also came out in favour of integration with Indonesia.

Indonesia again welcomed these developments and only sought assurances from Portugal that the process of decolonization and the act of self-determination be conducted fairly so as to reflect the true aspirations and will of the East Timorese people. Indeed, more than just welcoming, Indonesia at the request of Portugal extended its active cooperation to the process as inter alia evidenced by the series of meetings held between high-level representatives of the two sides in New York, September 1974; Lisbon, October 1974; London, March 1975; Jakarta, August and September 1975; and Rome, November 1975. At those meetings, Indonesia time and again reaffirmed its readiness to support Portugal in the peaceful and orderly implementation of the decolonization process, on the basis of Portugal's own plan, subsequently promulgated as Constitutional Law number 7/75 (1975).

Unfortunately, however, things went woefully wrong from the start. The FRETILIN persistently refused to cooperate in a peaceful and orderly decolonization of the territory and attempted in various ways to circumvent the envisaged democratic procedures. Aided and abetted by elements of the local colonial administration and fortified by the extensive military backing provided by the

members of the former colonial army (TROPAZ), the FRETILIN subsequently embarked upon acts of terrorism, intimidation, abduction and assassinations against their political opponents, in particular against leaders of the APODETI. They boycotted the Macao meeting of June 1975, called by Portugal and attended by the four other political parties, to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. It thus became increasingly apparent that FRETILIN was bent on seizing power by force rather than through a democratic referendum. As a result, the territory was plunged into a situation of rising tensions, political chaos and in the end armed confrontation and civil war, pitting the FRETILIN against the other parties, representing the overwhelming majority of the people of East Timor, who refused to submit themselves to the dictation of a violent minority.

The Portuguese colonial administration in Dili made no serious effort to stop the fighting and bloodshed. On the contrary, it compounded the strife by clandestinely turning over its arms and munitions to the FRETILIN. In August 1975, at the height of the turmoil and strife, the then Governor of East Timor and his staff simply packed up and left -- in the same way and under quite similar circumstances as Portugal did in Angola and Mozambique. With the complete breakdown of governmental authority, the civil war raged on causing a massive influx of tens of thousands of refugees into Indonesian West Timor, thus posing serious political, economic, social and security problems for Indonesia. By October 1975 more than 3,000 people had lost their lives in the civil war and more than 42,000 refugees had crossed the border into West Timor.

Despite this unforeseen and deplorable train of events Indonesia continued to urge Portugal to exercise its authority and responsibility in conducting a just and orderly decolonization and ensuring that no single political group be allowed to impose its will upon the rest of the people. As late as in November 1975, the Indonesian Foreign Minister agreed to meet with his Portuguese counterpart in Rome. At the end of that meeting a joint communique was issued in which both sides concurred on the urgent need to restore peace and order in the territory so as to enable the people freely to decide their own future. Towards this end, it was decided that a meeting between Portugal and all five political parties be held as soon as possible.

While the other four parties agreed, the FRETILIN again refused. Instead, on November 28, 1975, it unilaterally declared the independence of East Timor, thereby blocking all avenues towards a peaceful solution to the problem.

After Portugal's precipitate and irresponsible abandonment of the territory and its abject failure to fulfill its responsibilities as administering authority, and in the face of FRETILIN's mounting reign of terror against its own people, the four other political parties considered themselves no longer bound to any decolonization covenant with the erstwhile colonial power. They intensified their struggle against the FRETILIN forces and in response to FRETILIN's U.D.I. they in turn proclaimed on November 30, 1975 the independence of East Timor through integration with the Republic of Indonesia; they established a Provisional Government and called upon the Government of Indonesia to take the necessary steps to protect the lives of the East Timorese who had declared themselves to be part of Indonesia. It was only at this point, with no action taken by anyone to stop the mass killings and atrocities perpetrated by the FRETILIN against the East Timorese people that Indonesia became inexorably involved in the East Timor crisis.

Although the Indonesian people welcomed the expressed desire of the East Timorese people for integration, the Government declared that it would not accede to it until after a proper exercise of the right to self-determination had been conducted. Hence, a provisional People's Assembly of East Timor was formed whose members, representing all the districts of East Timor, were duly elected according to a system closely similar to the plan originally conceived by Portugal itself (i.e. Constitutional Law number 7/75). In the capital city of Dili on May 31, 1976, this Assembly, in a public session which was also attended by members of the diplomatic corps accredited in Jakarta as well as by representatives of the local and international media, formally cast its vote to choose independence through integration with the Republic of Indonesia. A formal request for integration was presented to the Indonesian Government by a delegation of the People's Assembly on June 7, 1976. Before approving this request, Indonesia decided to dispatch a fact-finding mission to the territory to determine whether the request accurately represented the wishes of the majority of the people. It was only after receipt of a positive report from the fact-

finding mission that Indonesia's Parliament acted and approved a draft statute of integration on July 15, 1976. Subsequently, the statute was signed into law and formally promulgated by the President of Indonesia on July 17, 1976.

By that act, four centuries of Portuguese colonialism and of oppression and suffering for the people of East Timor and months of fratricidal strife and bloodshed had come to an end.

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In their attempts at re-writing or otherwise distorting the history of decolonization in East Timor, Portugal and the small band of FRETILIN remnants under their tutelage have habitually accused Indonesia of having "by its invasion of East Timor brutally stopped the self-determination process in the territory," thereby also causing Portugal "to cease being able to carry out its responsibilities as the UN - recognized administering power." The facts as shown in the foregoing expose and as distinct from the fictions and disinformation spread by Indonesia's detractors, present an entirely different picture.

Firstly, what was left of an orderly and peaceful decolonization came to an abrupt halt when in August 1975 the Portuguese colonial administration abandoned East Timor in a most irresponsible manner, after allowing the situation in the territory to deteriorate to the point of civil war, in fact, after practically instigating civil war by clandestinely turning over its arms and munitions to one particular group, the FRETILIN. In doing so, Portugal in effect relinquished its responsibility as administering power. By failing in its responsibility, Portugal in our view has forfeited any right, morally and legally, to be still considered the administering power in East Timor. We cannot but be astonished that there are still those who would wish to set the clock back and return East Timor to its former colonial master in order for that country to re-do what it miserably failed to do 17 years ago. Secondly, it was the FRETILIN which from the outset refused to participate in an orderly and peaceful process of decolonization. It was FRETILIN's attempt to seize power by force of arms rather than through democratic methods and the consequent refusal by the majority of the East Timorese people to accept such a fait-accompli that plunged the territory into

violent civil war. Again, it was the FRETILIN which on 28 of November 1976 unilaterally declared independence, without bothering about any semblance of an exercise of popular self-determination.

In August and November 1975 Indonesia was not even involved in the tragic events unfolding in East Timor, although it had to bear the consequences of the turmoil inter alia in the form of 42,000 East Timorese refugees streaming across the border into West Timor. Thus, there are no factual grounds whatsoever to accuse Indonesia of having disrupted East Timor's decolonization process and no amount of obfuscation or convoluted arguments can erase the responsibility that Portugal and the FRETILIN must bear in this regard.

Indonesia's subsequent involvement in East Timor can therefore be seen as endeavouring to respond, as restrainedly as possible, to the chaotic and tragic circumstances which unfortunately accompanied the decolonization process in East Timor. Far from invading, occupying or annexing another, independent country -- as has happened elsewhere -- Indonesia's role in East Timor was one of contributing to the process of decolonization of a non-selfgoverning territory, inter alia by helping to ensure that the democratically expressed will of the majority of the people not be overruled by the unilateral imposition of a ruthless minority.

Much has been made of the fact that the UN was "not involved" in the process of decolonization in East Timor. It is a matter of public record, however, that throughout 1976 the Provisional Government of East Timor had made every effort to have the UN participate in the process. In fact, a delegation of the Provisional Government was sent to New York and Geneva with the sole purpose of meeting with and inviting the relevant UN organs, the Security Council, the Committee of 24 of the UNGA, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, to participate in the self-determination exercise. Regrettably, all of these invitations were accorded a negative response as Portugal and its supporters blocked every attempt in this direction. In spite of these disappointments, the Provisional Government of East Timor never failed to report each and every stage of the decolonization process to the relevant UN organs mentioned above.

In any case, what is also often ignored or not sufficiently known is the fact that principle IX (b) of Resolution 1541 (1960) states that with regard to integration "the UN could, when it deems necessary, supervise these processes." It is clear, therefore, that the participation of the UN in the process of decolonization, while laudable, is not mandatory. Moreover, no two cases of decolonization are exactly the same, subject as they are to the geo-political and historical realities prevailing in the territories concerned. As to the exercise of the right of self-determination, many erstwhile non-selfgoverning territories have gained their independence without resort to Resolution 1514 and 1541 and this was also the case with all other ex-colonies of Portugal. In some of these countries, civil war and conflict continue even to this day.

Growing international recognition of the correctness of the decision of the people of East Timor to become independent through integration with Indonesia is, inter alia, reflected by the fact that at the 37th UNGA session in 1982, the resolution on East Timor submitted by Portugal and its supporters passed only by a margin of two votes (50 votes in favour against 48, with a large number of countries abstaining). At each subsequent annual UNGA session until today, discussion of the question of East Timor has been deferred as efforts to find an acceptable solution to the question since 1983 moved into a process of tri-partite dialogue between Portugal and Indonesia under the auspices of the UN Secretary General. In many other international forums too, the question of East Timor self-determination has ceased to be an issue, reflecting the growing understanding among the international community of the true circumstances surrounding the process of decolonization and the actual situation in the province.

Since integration, Indonesia's sincere intent to give substance to the freedom won by the people of East Timor is reflected in its continuous efforts towards the accelerated development of East Timor in all spheres of life -- economic, political, social -- as well as the protection of cultural and religious rights.

Agriculture, health, education, public housing, communications and other infrastructures have been and continue to be the priorities of development. From being

a perennial food deficit area since colonial times, East Timor is now reaching self-sufficiency in rice production. More asphalt roads, bridges, schools, hospitals and health-centres, public markets and places of worship have been built in the sixteen years since integration than during the entire 450 years of colonial rule.

Through daily scheduled airline connections, improved sea communications and a link-up with the nation-wide television and telephone network via Indonesia's own satellite, East Timor has also been able to end its erstwhile isolation.

Since 1977, the annual budget allocations by the central Government for East Timor has been, per capita, the largest among all of the provinces of Indonesia, which demonstrates the strong determination of the Indonesian Government and the people of East Timor to overcome the backwardness and neglect of the colonial period and to achieve parity with the rest of the nation.

The Indonesian Government maintains a policy of providing access to East Timor on a regular basis to foreign representatives, parliamentary missions, international agencies, journalists and others.

With regard to humanitarian assistance, UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP, WHO as well as the ICRC and the CRS have been operating in East Timor, some since 1979.

Indonesia's record on the question of freedom of worship, religious tolerance and respect for and active promotion of the cultural heritage of each of its diverse ethnic groups, is well established and beyond contention. There is complete freedom of religion in East Timor. There are no restrictions placed on the clergy's pastoral duties. The Catholic Church has full authority over the parochial school system and has been steadily expanding its educational activities. In addition, the Catholic Church in East Timor participates with other humanitarian organizations in providing assistance to the population. The Provincial and Central Governments have allocated and are continuing to allocate significant resources, financial and otherwise, to facilitate the unfettered development of religious life in the province.

There is complete freedom of cultural expression in East Timor. The ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage of the province is being protected, including its traditions and values, languages and customs. Legislative and administrative measures have been enacted to ensure the continued flowering of the East Timorese culture. Not only is the cultural heritage of East Timor being preserved, but also awareness of East Timorese culture is being fostered among all other Indonesians, while at the same time the people of East Timor are being made aware of the other regional cultures of the country. Essentially, this process of enrichment of the national culture is and has always been at the very core of Indonesia's national motto "Unity through Diversity."

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For the past seventeen years, the UN and the international community at large have been subjected to a persistent effort of disinformation and distortion on the question of the decolonization of East Timor as well as to a malicious campaign of slander and innuendo against Indonesia on this subject, launched by Portugal and the remnants of the FRETILIN. It is high time to put an end to this state of affairs.

By continuing to give credence to the myth that a handful of political agitators abroad, who call themselves FRETILIN or Convergencia or whatever, could represent anybody else but themselves; by sustaining the unwarranted hope that there might be a chance to reverse the expressed wish of the overwhelming majority of East Timorese in favour of the obsessions of an unrepresentative minority, will only do a great disservice to the real interests of the East Timorese people!

By desperately trying to keep alive a non-issue, built around a long-discredited cause, Indonesia's detractors are merely prolonging the turmoil and agony in East Timor.

The question arises : how long can and should the UN and the international community at large continue to entertain the demands of a small, unrepresentative exile group for the sanctioning of their version of decolonization in East Timor, no matter how unjustified and irrational those demands are?

It is high time for those who profess to champion the humanitarian interests and welfare of the East Timorese people to understand, that their concerns are not being served by allowing a malicious, strident anti-Indonesia campaign to be waged by those obviously intent on political rather than human rights or humanitarian objectives.

It is high time for those who espouse the principles of self-determination and democracy, which imply respect for the wishes of the majority, to realize that they cannot at the same time support the unreasonable and irrational demands of a minority.

It is high time for Indonesia's detractors to appraise the decolonization process that has taken place in East Timor with at least a modicum of objectivity rather than through the prism of their own preconceptions, political prejudices or ideological inclinations. To them I should like to suggest : please consider the facts rather than persist in fictions or myths. Assess objectively the historical process, the geo-political, cultural and socio-economic realities pertinent to the East Timor issue. For then they may be able to accept the truth that the people of East Timor have chosen, have determined their fate, through a process of decolonization fully in accord with the essence and spirit of the relevant UN Resolutions, i.e. Resolutions 1514 (XV), 1541 (XV), in particular Principles VI, VIII and IX, and Resolution 2625 (XXV); and that what the overwhelming majority of the East Timorese people really desire is to develop their province in peace and in freedom.

Washington, D.C., 20th February 1992